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Integrating Food Security and Traditional Knowledge: Permaculture Approaches for Poverty Alleviation in South Africa



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[Submitted Paper]

Introduction

Food security is a system that rests with people. It is a system of meeting long-term food needs. It goes beyond production to include preservation and storage. Land, water, forests, grasses and livestock are important components of food security.

In situations of mass poverty as currently exists in South Africa, where malnourishment of children under 5 is almost at 60% in areas in which we work, food security interventions have to be addressed within the broader context of poverty alleviation. Through food security awareness building, avenues are created for questioning and debating the frame conditions provided by government policies such as the Land Reform Policy.

In South Africa food security is an activism issue. It starts with what people have, which is in most cases the right to occupy land without long-term security. Those

alienated from land have lost the technologies, the feel for the land and production systems based on traditional patterns of co-operation which take ritualistic significance around the production cycle.

The future to me is not just to have enough food for one year but also take into account the next 2 to 3 years in case of drought. Food security is not just having vegetables such as spinach, cabbage, onions, tomatoes, green beans, pumpkins, etc. It means taking into account the basic food needs which sustain food requirements the households are accustomed to. Different food requirements of cultural groups of the indigenous people of South Africa vary from mealie-meal, processed mealies, sorghum, millet, dry beans, peanuts, melons, sweet cane and the traditional pumpkin which also provides a green vegetable for a period stretching into winter.

All these crops are produced through multi-cropping in dryland fields. Without access to animal products food production is incomplete. Animal husbandry is an integral part of food security to ensure that households have milk, meat and eggs. The question for food security is, is the combination of crop production and animal husbandry possible for the majority of the households in the rural areas of South Africa?

Food security in historical perspective

The description I have outlined above existed historically when communities could still contain and control their own lives. There are presently very few households in rural areas able to produce enough to survive even for a day. I am not an academic to scientifically analyse how events unfolded to destroy the traditional subsistence food patterns which ensured food security for all in rural South African communities. The following case descriptions inform what I understand as food security and how communities were organised to ensure it.

I grew up in the Northern Transvaal in a rural village within the Tribal Reserve areas. The community relied on farming for a living. They produced from the dryland fields all their food needs. They preserved and stored away surplus for future years. The following discussion represents how production was organised.

Ownership of land was not through title deeds. Land was a communal property for all who lived in the village. Residential land was not planned according to the planning systems of today. The small communities or villages were spread out, each village with its own authority structures like headmen and counsellors to co-ordinate with the tribal chief. The tribal chief was the custodian of the cultural and social systems, ensuring that communal values and norms were respected and adhered to. Food security systems which existed at the time made it possible for people to be committed to working the land, they ensured that the food production cycle of activities was respected by all and that the means of production were accessible to all through people's social groups.

Food production activities started with the ploughing season in August, which marked the beginning of the new year. This was followed by the first rains called "Kgokgola Moko". During this time all crop waste from harvesting decomposes,

grains scattered all over after thrashing the corn germinates, and wild green vegetable (morogo) grows in the fields. Kraal manure from cattle, goats, sheep and donkeys is scattered throughout the fields in preparation for ploughing. The chief then called for a sacred ceremony to bless the seed. This activity occurred in September. The custodian of the ritual in the form of the tribal traditional doctor performed an environmental cleansing ceremony. Old women and young girls dressed up in traditional clothes carried water from the river or wells to the chief's kraal. The traditional doctor would then perform the ritual, after which he would lead the community into the veldt to collect rubbish to be burnt at the chief's kraal. The occasion was then followed by dancing and feasting.

The ploughing start as soon as the rains fall. Ploughing carries on until December and January. Because of these ceremonies multi-cropping was a conscious process. Every household planted a variety of seeds, from sorghum and millet for food and beer, mealies (where conducive), beans, cowpeas, jugo beans, green lentils, peanuts, melons, water melons, pumpkins and calabashes. The process of planting in between the main crops occurred during weeding when the main crop would have gained height. The creeper crops cover the soil to suppress weeds and also to protect the soil from extreme heat.

In February the women and young girls started to pick melons, cowpeas and pumpkin leaves to preserve as dried green vegetable (morogo). This is then stored away in big clay pots and sealed with fresh cow dung to prevent pest encroachment. This activity continues into March and April. Beans, jugo and lentils from earlier crops are harvested, dried and stored away. To keep pests out wood-ash is added. These can keep for up to 3 years without pest infestation. During this period melons and pumpkins are also ready for harvesting. Women prepare mud floors (diboya) to thrash the corn while men prepare silos to store grain. Some of the melons are dried and stored away for the future.

To ensure food supply for the future, green mealies, cowpeas and jugo beans are cooked in big pots with the skin on and dried. These are then stored away in big clay pots or bags for the future. This method of preservation controls pests. The households can re-cook the preserved food whenever it is needed. Sweet cane and pips from melons are also dried and preserved. A variety of nutritious dishes are prepared by the mother in the household to feed the family (extended family included).

Methods of preserving grain varied from grass baskets able to take 10-20 bags of sorghum and millet buried in the kraal. The corn on the edge of the grass basket would soak up but not germinate. This would have the taste and smell of kraal manure, but the inside grain would remain fresh.

Processing grain was through grinding stones and stamping blocks to get a variety of products from a whole embryo meal rich in protein, oil and mineral salts to feed young babies. Other products would be mealie-meal, samp, mealie-rice and bran. The bran leftovers were used as feed for pigs and chickens. Cowpeas, melon pips and peanuts were processed into powder and stored away in clay pots or calabashes ready to be used as soft porridge mixed with milk and mealie-meal for children. The main use of peanuts and pips is to make nutritious dishes from mixing with

preserved green vegetable. Fresh green vegetables (morogo) is also a delicious dish when mixed with either peanut or pip meal.

Most of the practices mentioned above still exist in some areas in the Northern Province and Mpumalanga such as Sekhukhune, Tzaneen, Athol, Bushbuckridge and Venda. However, the majority of the people have no land. Where they have access to land, it is so small that people can only produce food at less than subsistence level, and they are compelled to supplement their food needs by purchasing. What needs to be addressed is why there is hunger and malnutrition in the rural areas of South Africa when there is potential for the achievement of food security.

Factors which contributed to the destruction of food security systems in rural South Africa

In South Africa land dispossession has been going on from as early as the arrival of the European settlers, a gradual grinding machine for the displacement of the South African indigenous people through state legislation. The Land Acts of 1913 and 1936 dispossessed people of their land, and the separate development strategies which introduced the Betterment Schemes were the last blow. The consequences of these strategies are clear and visible – the once content, coherent and confident communities able to control their food needs are presently going hungry and live under conditions of immense poverty.

I would like to explain the Betterment Scheme which was part and parcel of the separate development strategy of the National Party government. In my area the Betterment Scheme was explained as the best way to deal with district planning for rural areas. Small scattered villages were clustered in small homestead plots of 50m x 50m for those who owned cattle and 30m x 20m for those who didn't. Those who had cattle were designated as small farmers and some land for farming was allocated some 10km away from the residential area. The betterment strategy was explained as a process which would ensure that people got infrastructure services such as water, schools, roads, telephones, etc. This promise was made when people got resettled in the late 1950s but to the time the new government took over in 1994, nothing had happened except for small piece-meal solutions.

The consequences of this strategy was the disorganisation of the social systems on which food security systems were anchored. Migratory labour escalated and most of the able bodied men left the villages leaving mostly women and children at home. Subsistence farming was undermined and the small farmers did not emerge as was expected. The donkey and goat cleanup campaign by the Department of Agriculture of the time dispossessed the majority of the people of the means of transport and draft power. The reason given was that goats and donkeys destroyed the environment. People resisted but were unsuccessful. The donkeys were railed to the game reserves to feed the lions and the owners got 25c compensation per donkey.

Evictions from the white owned farming areas in the neighbouring farms intensified, increasing the population density in the resettlement areas. Those who tried to work the land gave up because of vandalism. The mode of life simply changed. Working the land was no longer feasible. People resorted to other ways of survival,

throwing out the values and norms which sustained their survival. Survival by any means – selling of dagga and beer, stealing cattle and chickens from those who had them – became the order of the day. Tribal structures to deal with the situation failed. Communities moved from a situation of pockets of poverty to mass poverty. In communities such as Mmalebogo in Bochum where there was intense resistance to betterment schemes in the form of reduction of cattle populations, planning of villages and fields and imposition of the authority of the Bantustan Lebowa government, the government of the day designed a strategy to undermine the resistance. Communities from other areas such as the Batlokwa Ga-Machaka, Ga-Makgato and Ga-Senthumule were dumped in Bochum with their chiefs and headmen. More people from white-owned farms were evicted or settled voluntarily in Bochum.

The same process was pursued for Sekhukhune. Removals of communities from Lydenburg-Boomplaas were brought to Leboeng next to the Strydom Tunnel. Some came from Doornkop and went to Ga-Mampuru in the Praktiseer district of Sekhukhune. Most of the people came from the farming areas through evictions from white farming areas around Rossenekraal, Lydenburg, Ohrigstad, Loskop, Stofberg, Middleburg, Grobblersdal and Marble Hall. Around Jane Furse population density left people with no land except homestead plots. Many more villages in Sekhukhune are swelling up, taking more land for residential purposes and leaving people with small areas for field crop production.

Another factor that disturbed the social systems around food security was the church. As people got converted into Christianity, everything that was associated with traditional culture was undermined. This process affected or spilled over into the traditional tribal institutions for mobilising efforts and commitment around food production activities. The converted looked down upon the traditional technologies. Traditional knowledge and wisdom gradually faded away, leaving the present generation with no skills for survival except in very exceptional villages such as Manganeng, Mohlaletsi, Rakgoadi and very few others.

What is to be done

With many people not able to access land, the systems described above have no meaning. The norms and values that sustain food security are no longer respected. Through community development by non-government organisations working with community-based organisations (CBO), some efforts to revive some of the skills and knowledge are in progress. In Sekhukhune, Tsoga-O-Itirele group around Jane Furse, with the help of EDA, has launched food processing workshops which started in 1991. EDA gave this group support in accessing grains such as mealies and beans as well as peanuts, cowpeas, lentils, juko and soy beans. The technology used for food processing is traditional. Government officials from agriculture, health and welfare in the region as well as civil society groupings working in the area were invited. This process is now built into Hlatlolanang, a primary health care CBO serving the people of Sekhukhune. EDA facilitated a process of capacity building in permaculture design, training and implementation integrating the food processing component to make sure that the poorest of the poor can have a base of support in their own communities to begin the struggle to achieve food security, given what is available in terms of land and traditional knowledge and skills.

This has now been institutionalised into an annual event following harvesting. The women's groups come together for a week to hold a special event to re-educate the youth so that we can reach a level where some of our cultural systems of production can re-emerge through community efforts. Through Hlatlolanang this process reaches out to 48 villages in the Sekhukhune region. Using permaculture designs around homestead gardens, fruit tree planting was also introduced. Some of the poorest households have reached a high level of fruit production on homestead plots, using water harvesting methods of catching rain water from the roof, run-off water through swales and trenches, recycling the household grey water, mulching and composting to maximise what can feasibly be produced on household plots. Awareness of the environment and conservation has reached levels where permaculture approaches are institutionalised within the women's groups' approaches to production. The groups are calling on the local government to give a hand in soil reclamation activities to fight the degradation of the environment through community efforts. The move is to take the struggle out of the homestead into the surrounding communal land, to draw in government resources and available technologies to deal with dongas that are as deep as 10m and 10m wide, cutting across some residential land as well as fields around villages.

These are just but some of the potential existing in some of the village communities. Much can still happen, but food security is a much deeper and broader issue which will remain a struggle for a long time to come. It requires institutions such as non-government organisations and governments to understand and acknowledge the knowledge and institutions of people affected by poverty, so that their strategies can affirm them and re-dress the injustices of the past. The pressing issue is land access and ownership, so that people are enabled to engage in food production for food security within ecological perimeters.

Thank you.